



Christian  
Reformed  
Church



# Challenging Conversations Toolkit

## Facilitator's Orientation

### Welcome to an opportunity

The release of the *Study Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality* represents a significant challenge for many of our members, churches, classes, and even our denomination. The issues it tackles are relevant, personal, and important. They can also be quite divisive.

As leaders, you can probably imagine at least a few ways that this report could generate conflict in your congregation or in our denomination. Maybe you want your congregation to engage with this report, but you're not sure how to do it. Maybe you sense that the topics in this report need careful attention, but you can't help but see all the ways the conversation could go badly.

Often when it comes to hard conversations, it's easier just to stay quiet and pretend everyone agrees than to risk open disagreement.

But at Pastor Church Resources, we have spent most of the last forty years inviting Christian Reformed congregations to embrace hard conversations rather than avoid them. We believe that challenging conversations among Christians, while sometimes scary, can become an opportunity to deepen our faith and strengthen our churches. That's because, at their best, challenging conversations require us to rely more deeply on the Spirit to help us love our neighbors, to bear with one another, and to trust the promise that in Christ all things hold together. In fact, challenging conversations, when attempted in Christ's name and for his glory, can be one of the most effective means by which God demonstrates his power and sanctifies his people.

It's just that sometimes we need a little help to get started.

That's why Pastor Church Resources, in consultation with the Human Sexuality Study Committee, has developed this Challenging Conversations Toolkit, a resource meant to help small groups in your church listen deeply to the report and to one another as you consider what to do next.

This five- to nine-session small-group resource is based on some of the best practices recommended by Pastor Church Resources for helping turn conflicts into opportunities for discipleship and witness.

## How to adapt this resource

### Adapting the Number of Sessions and the Topics Covered

As presently laid out, this Toolkit walks a group through the entire *Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality* report over the course of nine ninety-minute sessions as illustrated in the chart below.

SESSION TITLE	GOAL
1. Fears and Loves	To introduce the report as well as the intent, ground rules, and primary tools of the group.
2. A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality	To provide a container within which a group may engage with different sections of the report. Sessions 2–7 are virtually identical in format and content.
3. Pornography	
4. Gender Identity	
5. Homosexuality	
6. Singleness, Premarital Sex and Cohabitation, Polyamory and Divorce, Sexual Desire and Song of Songs	
7. Confessional Status	
8. Next Steps	To reflect on the experience and insights of the previous sessions and to determine what, if anything, the group may want to share with their church council.
9. An Activity with Council	To provide a template for a combined meeting of group members and council to share what the group has done and what, if anything, the group would like to share with the council.

We understand, however, that attending nine sessions is a significant commitment for facilitators and participants to make. Consequently, we expect that facilitators, in conversation with their council or group members, may adapt the layout to suit the needs and context in which the group is meeting. In fact, the curriculum is designed to be extremely adaptable: a facilitator needs only to take the template of sessions 2–7 and change the reading assignments upon which the conversations will be based.

That said, while the structure is highly adaptable, we recommend that groups meet not fewer than five times. If a group does decide to adapt or shorten the study, we recommend that groups do at least sessions 1 and 8 as presently written.

For example, a group may adapt their sessions as shown in the table below.

## SAMPLE ADAPTATION

SESSION TITLE	GOAL
1. Fears and Loves (1)	To introduce the report as well as the intent, ground rules, and primary tools of the group.
2. A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality and Pornography (2-3)	To provide a container within which a group may engage with different sections of the report. These sessions are virtually identical in format and content. If you were to adapt in this way, you'd have to ensure that the reading assignments were properly adjusted.
3. Gender Identity and Homosexuality (4-5)	
4. Confessional Status (7)	
5. Next Steps (8)	To reflect on the experience and insights of the previous sessions and to determine what, if anything, the group may want to share with their church council.

The benefit of an adaptation like this is that the group is making a more manageable commitment and focusing on the topics of greatest relevance to the group. But there are sacrifices. For one, the Toolkit's process is designed to encourage trust-building over time. Fewer meetings means less opportunity to build the kind of trust this conversation requires. Also, the report is designed to address a range of critical issues, not just same-sex marriage. Focusing narrowly on one or two hot-button issues may be faster, but some important topics will not be engaged, and the topics that are engaged will not be engaged in such great depth or with as much underlying trust.

One of the most important rules of good process in hard conversations is "do not rush." Cleaning up after a rushed process almost always takes more time than doing the process thoroughly in the first place.

### Adapting Reading Assignments

Whether or not the group combines or eliminates sessions, the group should make a decision about how much reading they will commit to do. The report is lengthy and, in places, fairly technical. Not everyone has the interest or capacity to read thirty or more pages of the report each week. For this reason, some groups may decide that the group will commit to read only the relevant sections of the Executive Summary each week. In such cases, if a group member wishes, they may also read the relevant sections of the full report. However, the person reading extra material should then keep in mind during times of group interaction that their fellow group members may not always know what they are referring to.



## SESSION 1

# Fears and Loves

Reading assignment to be completed before we meet for Session 1:

- [Read Study Report, “Introduction” and “Preamble” \(Sections I and II, pp. 1–14\)](#)
- [Read Executive Summary, “Preamble” \(Section I, p. 1\)](#)

## Welcome

### Check-in Circle

1. Name
2. How long have you been a part of this congregation?
3. What do you value about this congregation?

### Clarifying the Goal of Our Group

For the next few weeks we will gather as a group to share our responses to different sections of the *Study Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation—Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality* (Study Report). The structure of each session is meant to help us listen deeply to the report and to one another while seeking to engage these often-divisive topics in distinctly Christian ways. The purpose of this group is not to make a decision about how our congregation should formally respond to the Study Report. In our denomination, the council (made up of the elders, deacons, and ministers) is the decision-making body of the church, and the council is to make decisions in ways consistent with our denomination’s Church Order and our congregation’s bylaws.

Instead, our gatherings are designed to help us engage these important topics while “bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). We expect that engaging these topics as Christians will deepen our faith, clarify how we should live, and give witness to the presence and power of God’s Spirit at work among us. An additional result of these groups is that they may provide important insight or context for the council should it decide to take any action. In other words, we hope that what happens in these groups informs any decision the council might make in the future, but what happens in these groups in no way binds the council to a certain decision.

We are going to participate in a number of listening circles together. The success of the circles depends on all of us. Let’s take time to answer the following questions:

1. **What do you need from each other so we can be well together, listen well to each other, and participate as fully as possible?**
2. **What are you willing to do to ensure the success of this group?**

We will create a list of group norms and expectations on how we engage with one another that everyone can agree on. As the sessions progress, we can make changes to our norms if necessary.

Before we begin, I would like to clarify a couple of ground rules for this circle.

First, what others say in the circle stays in the circle. In order to share what we're really thinking and feeling, we'll need to trust one another. As brothers and sisters in Christ together, we need to be careful with what we say outside this group. Carelessness can harm those who have trusted us with what they've shared. Let us honor the trust we give one another.

(Facilitator's Note: if the group has already addressed confidentiality in the group norms, the facilitator can stress the importance of confidentiality. If the group did not talk about confidentiality as part of the group norms, an understanding of confidentiality can be added.)

Note that at the end of each session and again in our final session, there will be time for the group to decide what the group wants to say or do moving forward. That will be a natural place to consider whether something shared in the group might be shared more broadly.

Second, unless otherwise noted, every time we "go around the circle" we will use a talking piece (or a shared speaker's list, if meeting virtually). Only the person with the talking piece is permitted to speak. No interruptions from others or immediate responses will be permitted.

Third, if you do not wish to respond to a specific question, you may pass or ask that the facilitator come back to you at the end before asking the next question.

Fourth, because the primary purpose of these circles is to listen to each other, please don't take notes. Listen to understand what others are saying. We believe it's critical that people have an opportunity to feel genuinely heard.

**Are there any questions about the process?**

## **Fears and Loves<sup>1</sup>**

Many of us have had years to wonder about and study the issues addressed in this report. Yet this may be the first time we'll engage these topics openly with people in our congregation. Because these issues are relevant, personal, and important, it is natural to have some fear about how this process might go and what might happen in our church moving forward.

This video from The Colossian Forum clarifies how our fears often reveal what we love and how naming those fears together as a group can help move us forward (video link not available in sample).

We are beginning a study of and conversation about human sexuality. As part of this process, you will be invited to tell others what you really think about the issue. Going around the circle once for each question, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:

- 1. What struck you about the video?**
- 2. What are you concerned or anxious about?**
- 3. What do you fear could go wrong?**
- 4. What do you deeply value (the love behind the fear) that you want to protect?**

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1 This exercise is adapted from materials from The Colossian Forum. Learn more about their ministry at [colossianforum.org](http://colossianforum.org).

## Prayer

We've begun to name our fears. But in order to truly share our fears with one another and to address them, we need God's help. We also need help to discover the truly valuable things that seem at risk.

Invite a member or two from your group to read from 1 John 4:7–21:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

We'll divide our time of prayer into three sections focused on these verses. We'll first remember God's love for us. Then we'll confess that God's love should lead us to love. Then we'll ask God to cast out our fear with God's love. We'll close when I say, "Lord, in your mercy," and you reply, "hear our prayer."

I'll introduce each section with a Bible verse and an invitation for people to pray out loud.

### Let us pray.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

### Let us thank the Lord for the ways he shows his love for us.

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

"We love because he first loved us."

### Let us confess the ways we have been afraid and have failed to love.

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear."

### Let us ask God to drive out our fear with love.

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

Facilitator: Lord, in your mercy,

### All: hear our prayer.

## Responding to the Report

You've each had a chance to read some of the report.

Some parts of the report may have confirmed your fears. Other parts may have allayed your fears. Going around the circle, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:

1. **What is one part of the introduction or preamble that resonated with you?**
2. **What is one part of the introduction or preamble that frustrated you?**
3. **How does your resonance or frustration relate to what you love or fear?**

## Our Next Session

During our next session we will listen to the Study Report and each other based on the "Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality" section of the report.

To be sufficiently prepared to participate, we ask each participant to read at least the relevant section of the Executive Summary each week before we meet. We also strongly encourage you to read the relevant section in the full Study Report, which contains much more context and relevant detail than the summary.

(Facilitator's Note: Add any other pertinent information about gathering for the next session.)

## Check-out

Going around the circle, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:

1. **Is there something you heard that surprised you?**
2. **Is there something you heard that made you wonder?**
3. **Is there something you heard that made you start to think differently?**

## Closing Prayer

Sample



## SESSION 2

# A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

Reading assignment to be completed before we meet for Session 2:

- [Read Study Report, “A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality” \(Section III, pp. 15–36\)](#)
- [Read Executive Summary, “A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality” \(Section II, pp. 1–3\)](#)

## Check-in Circle

Before we start, let's do a quick check-in circle.

(Facilitator's Note: Choose one check-in question, such as: What was your favorite part about today? What did you need to do to get here today? What do you hope for from our session today?)

Reminder: In each of the upcoming sessions, we will gather as a group to share our responses to a different section of the Study Report. The structure of each session is meant to help us listen to the Study Report and to one another while seeking to engage these often-divisive topics in distinctly Christian ways. The purpose of this group is not to make a decision about how our congregation should formally respond to the Study Report.

Instead, these gatherings are designed to help us engage these important topics while “bearing with one another in love.” We expect that engaging these topics as Christians will deepen our faith, clarify how we should live, and give witness to the presence and power of God's Spirit at work among us. An additional result of these groups is that they may provide important insight or context for the council should it decide to take any action. In other words, while we hope that what happens in these groups informs any decision the council might make in the future, what happens in these groups in no way binds the council to a certain decision.

## Devotion

Throughout the New Testament letters, Christian discipleship is not assumed to take place *after* conflicts have been fixed, as though conflicts were only a distraction from a Christian's sanctification. Rather, our most beloved instructions for discipleship assume that disciples are relating to those they disagree with in distinctly Christian ways.

In other words, we do not put off our discipleship until these conflicts are resolved. Instead, the way we resolve these conflicts is *part of* our process of sanctification and discipleship. For instance, the virtues commended in Ephesians 4:1–6 only really make sense for communities dealing with some kind of conflict or division:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In fact, in the latter half of Ephesians 2, we see a clear example of division in the form of antagonism between Jews and Gentiles. If unity in the church were easy, the Ephesians wouldn't be asked to "make every effort." If Christians all agreed right away, there would be no reason to ask believers to "be patient, bearing with one another in love."

## Group Norms and Expectations

You'll recall that last time as a group we agreed on some group norms and expectations for how we will be together. Let's review them. Is there anything missing? (Add or subtract as the group decides.)

## Understanding the Report

In addition to listening well to one another, one of the goals of this group is to listen well to the Study Report. As fallen sinners in a sinful world, we often struggle to listen well to others, especially others with whom we disagree. Instead, we tend to create flimsy caricatures of other people's arguments and criticize those caricatures. But, of course, Jesus calls us to love both our neighbor and our enemy. (Certainly those we disagree with fit into at least one of those groups!)

One expression of Christian love is to listen well. Listening well is a straightforward but difficult part of loving my neighbor as myself. Listening well does not mean you must agree with what someone says. Rather, it means you seek to understand them as well as you'd like them to seek to understand you. This "Understanding" section is designed to help us listen well to the report before we share our response to the report. We'll do that by trying to imagine that the authors of the report are present with us in the circle. Let's try to name their fears and loves as they emerge in the report.

Going around the circle, we will share what we think the authors' fears or concerns might be. As a reminder, we follow a few ground rules in our circles. First, what is said in the circle stays in the circle. Strict confidentiality is very important. Second, we will use a talking piece (or a shared speaker's list if meeting virtually). Only the person with the talking piece is permitted to speak. No interruptions from others or immediate responses will be permitted. Third, if you do not wish to respond to a specific question, you may pass or ask that the facilitator come back to you at the end. These ground rules are intended to invite the person with the talking piece to speak. The job of the rest of us is simply to listen.

### **1. What do you think the authors of the Study Report are most concerned about? What do you think they fear could go wrong?**

Now let's go around the circle and share what value might be behind their fear.

### **2. What do the authors of the Study Report seem to deeply value—the love behind the fear—that they are trying to protect?**

Finally, let's go around the circle and share what hope might emerge from this love.

### **3. What is one thing the authors of the Study Report seem to hope will go right?**

## Listening and Understanding Circle

Having tried to understand the authors of the Study Report, we now move into a time of trying to listen to and understand one another. The same ground rules for the circle apply. However, at the end of this circle the group will have the opportunity to decide together what (if any) information is OK to share with others during the “Moving Forward” phase of this circle. During that phase, more informal discussion can take place. Until then we will use the talking piece.

### Does anyone have any questions about the ground rules?

I will now ask the first round of questions. In this round, I will ask each person two questions before I go on to the next person.

#### Round 1

**What’s one thought that comes to mind as you think about the Study Report?  
Who is affected? In what ways?**

#### Round 2

**What’s the hardest part for you?**

#### Round 3

**What are the main issues for us as a congregation?**

#### Round 4

**What needs to be done to move forward, and what are you prepared to do to help move things forward?**

(Facilitator’s Note: Write up the suggestions. Clarify the wording for each point. Ensure that you have heard participants correctly. Note to the group that these notes will inform conversation at the final session, when the group will decide on key themes from the sessions that participants would like to communicate with the church council.)

## Our Next Session

During our next session, unless otherwise indicated by the facilitator, we will listen to the Study Report and each other based on the “Pornography” section of the report.

To be sufficiently prepared to participate, we ask each participant to read at least the relevant section of the Executive Summary each week before we meet. We also strongly encourage you to read the relevant section in the full Study Report, which contains much more context and relevant detail than the summary.

(Facilitator’s Note: Add any other pertinent information about gathering for the next session.)

## Check-out

#### Round 5

Going around the circle, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:

- 1. Is there something you heard that surprised you?**
- 2. Is there something you heard that made you start to think differently?**

## Praise, Lament, and Hope

### Round 6

We'll save a few minutes at the end of each session to return in prayer together before God. Our goals in these groups are to listen well to the Study Report, to listen well to each other, and to engage this difficult topic in such a way that we "bear with one another in love." We'll do that by offering to God our praise, lament, and hope.

As facilitator, I will take brief notes on what is offered in prayer during this time. These notes will be saved for the group to review in our last session.

Let's begin with praise. Just speak out loud a word or sentence of praise.

**What happened here that we are thankful to God for?**

Now let's voice our laments.

**What are we sad about? Do we regret something we said or left unsaid? What do we want to be different?**

Finally, we look to the future. The experience of breaking the silence and engaging one another often brings hope. Go ahead and name it.

**Looking to the future, what possibilities do you see? What do we hope for?**

God has been listening, so we don't need to repeat all of these praises, laments, and hopes. We can close by simply saying:

Facilitator: Lord, in your mercy,

**All: hear our prayer.**

Sample